

„You shall have Imperishable Fame“

Performance, Reperformance and Writing in Early Greek Praise Poetry

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Abstract

‘Imperishable fame’ for the honorand is the central promise of the Indo-European praise poet. This presupposes reperformance and/or a subsequent reading-audience. Reperformance is indeed often anticipated in early Greek encomiastic poetry, notably the victory odes of Pindar and Bacchylides, which tend to combine the intensely personal focus of their genre with a pan-Hellenic outlook. By contrast, the emerging importance of written transmission and reading in the fifth century BC is ignored. The poems remained ‘conceptually oral’.

Concentrating on epinician, especially Pindar’s *First Pythian Ode*, this paper will examine how the Greek praise poets strove to ensure the perpetuation of their works. It is argued that they systematically prepared their poems for reception by later audiences who were not necessarily aware of the original occasion and mode of performance and who often, presumably, would be treated to a memorable extract rather than the complete ode.

Epinicians are notoriously vague about the location of their premiere and even less specific about the ‘logistics’ of the performance (dance, costume, choral vs solo singing). An obvious explanation is that this information was not required by the primary audience, but the imprecision also helps to elide the difference between the first and later performances. A similar strategy can be observed in the content of the poems. Traditional elements like prayers and hymnic sections, the central mythical narrative or allusions to historical events are presented in such a way that they transcend the primary occasion and become relevant to a wider audience.

These are only some categories in which, and examples of how, the epinician poets attempted to make their odes fulfil the ambitious promise of ‘imperishable fame’. The ancient reception of individual poems and the survival of at least Pindar’s *Epinicians* via the mediaeval manuscript tradition (and as school-texts to boot) prove the enduring value of their approach.